

THINGS RESCUED FROM ETERNAL NONEXISTENCE
Jim Leftwich

Useless Writing

Skills are acquired behaviors, similar to acquired tastes. They are learned behaviors valued by the dominant culture to the extent that it can use them. Different areas of the dominant culture value different skills. Skill is developed originally, jump-started if you will, through training, then honed, refined, through experience, through practice, the practice of the particular skill. One sets out to learn a skill, seeks out an expert in the field, and is trained by rote and through information until one has acquired the desired skill. It is the same whether one wishes to repair an automobile engine or write a sonnet, program a computer or paint a portrait. There is a hierarchy at work here, and those who reside at the highest levels do so due to their possession of a specialized knowledge and their mastery of its requisite activities: the arcana and its secret gestures: the gnosis and its rites. Almost all of us can learn almost any skill if we desire to do so. All that is required is the desire and the work, the desire and the willingness to put in the time and put forth the effort to acquire the skill. All the skills that are taught, and the ways in which they are taught, are structurally necessary to the culture that teaches them, else they would not be taught. We should think of this usefulness as meaning only one thing: useful means useful to the dominant culture, always and only. That which is deemed useful is such only insofar as it reinforces the fundamental structure of the culture. The power relations that are structurally in place must remain structurally in place. Change is not only allowed, it is required, but only in the details of the larger pattern; the larger pattern of necessity must remain intact.

What happens if one desires to practice useless skills, skills that are not useful in maintaining the structure of the culture? First of all, one will not be able to acquire these skills in the usual manner. There will be no teachers provided by the culture; no training will be available. One's desire will of necessity need be nearly an obsession. The work, the time and effort required, may seem disproportionate to the desire. One will likely decide to pursue some other skill, to alter one's desire, to attune one's desire to those regarded as useful by the culture.

What happens if one persists in the pursuit of useless skills? It is unlikely that an entirely unforeseen activity will be invented, so one will work in the shadows of an already established tradition. But, at least at the outset, one will work alone, without guides or guidelines. The wheel will likely be reinvented accidentally and often. (Reinventing the wheel is useful in the

pursuit of useless skills.) But the wheel is not a part of the desire, so it will be discarded — discarded not as useless, but as useful, therefore inappropriate to the pursuit. One trains by sorting and wandering, sifting, brooding, drifting, gathering and discarding, always discarding. This is a nomadic pursuit, not necessarily directionless or circuitous, but always everything but the steady step along a straight and narrow path. This is the crooked path, and its passage is along the low road.

This autodidact will learn to do things that others have no desire to do, that others are not allowed to do, that others are not able to think of doing. This is obvious from the outside looking in, but only acknowledged by the dominant culture in moods of elitist condescension. The normative reaction of the dominant culture will be derision or a haughty indifference. Structural superiority, however, permits itself the privilege of praising from a position of ignorance. This is a method that attempts to appropriate the useless. A cursory glance at recent cultural history in America alone reveals several instances of this. There is only one way around this: if one is truly committed to the practice of useless skills, one must be constantly on guard against one's own tendencies towards usefulness.

Two useless skills:

1. private writing, by which I mean writing that has a strictly subjective significance for the writer. this writing may be appropriated by the dominant culture, i.e. published, sold, archived, studied, etc., but it cannot be known for what it is. a writer's disciplined practice of private writing can only be known as such by that writer. other knowledge concerning it will never be other than ancillary.
2. asemic writing, by which I mean writing that is shifted intentionally towards the unreadable, towards image, without discarding entirely all vestiges of either the letter or the line, and without assuming the alternative status of visual art. it is a hybrid writing, a writing not meant for a reading mingled with an imaging not meant for looking. it is a useless, mutant writing, its uselessness a mutagen for the writer.

3.12.01

Six Insane Impulses to Art-Making

Prinzhorn identified six interrelated 'impulses' to configuration, namely the expressive, decorative, playful, and imitative 'urges', the need to impose pictorial order, and the need to imbue the artefact with symbolic content.

— Colin Rhodes, in *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*

To undertake any kind of significant art-making is at least analogous to madness. Specifically, to situate the activity of art-making at or even near the center of one's life is at least analogous to madness. If madness is evidenced by aberrational behavior born of an abnormal processing of experience, any kind of art-making, when it is considered a significant activity by the artist, is at least analogous to madness. But this finally doesn't tell us much of interest or of use. Certain kinds of psychiatrists and artists have agreed on all this for years.

The cultural norms established for behavior, and for the processing of experience, are called into question by a moment's thought concerning any aspect of inhabiting a particular culture. That all experience is subjective experience is a given. Any kind of radically subjective experience will be perceived by the culture as an abnormal processing of experience. All that is required to render experience radical is that the experiencer be aware not only of the experience but also of experiencing. How is an experience constructed? What coding and decoding is involved? Not just how much of experience is culturally constructed, but what is any individual's involvement in nourishing and sustaining that constructedness? All significant art-making is involved in rendering experience radically subjective.

Conventional concepts of insanity are utter nonsense. I would like to say they are born of a dangerous ignorance, obliviousness, but this is not the case: born of a very dangerous desire to control, quarantine, quash, to diminish or extinguish, — this is the case.

We could say art-making is in no way analogous to madness; it is the essence of health; we would find agreement everywhere — as long as nothing much is going on in the art-making. We could list Prinzhorn's six impulses to configuration as the central exhibit in our argument for the sanity of art.

1 — expressive: self-expression, as in: I am here: handprints on cave walls: traces of a passage: passing through: left along the particular path taken: records of activities, gestures; not expression as in the construction of a self, and its subsequent (or simultaneous) aggrandizement; more like an emptying, giving back: that which is potential, possible, made actual: in any unique configuration, including the unique configuration known as a human individual, is the potential for other configurations: expression, then, to allow: to surrender self to the others contained in self: to express oneself, therefore, is to release the others that one contains: expressivity, then, is incessant change, intentional subjection of oneself to alteration of oneself: the more self-expression, in this sense, the less self: why leave a

trace? as the barest outline of a provisional map, almost a pentimento of a lost map's hachures: and because the balance is shifted heavily towards self-expression as self-aggrandizement: to slightly shift the scales.

2 — decorative: decorative is a subcategory of playful: it is playful in a daydream: playful is of primary importance only when it is entirely awake:

3 — playful: playful is against, or away from, practical and purposeful: to act in the present as if there only is the present: playful is a particular and a special relationship with time: past, present and future coalesce at a point in time just slightly ahead of the present, though not in the future, at the exact point of direct experience: the exact point of direct experience is a phase transition at the human end of which a construction of outside/inside occurs (of objective/subjective, then/now): it is the chaotic, timeless non-site of being, and it can be entered. objects, materials, things are not objects or materials or things, they are catalysts of a hierophany, a numinous near presence: playful evokes a fully-engaged absence: the world is not the world and we know it.

4 — imitative: imitative is the original strategy against inertia (as a way of getting started, so the body at rest does not remain at rest): it inaugurates being's counter-tendency to entropy (it augurs against inert uniformity): once underway, the best thing about imitative is how easily it is discarded.

5 — the need to impose pictorial order is not as strong as the will to explore pictorial disorder.

6 — the need to imbue the artifact with symbolic content: there is no need whatsoever for this.

3.14.01

Things to Forget #1

1) the expression of your beliefs (forget your beliefs)

By writing this I suppose I am setting a bad example. I am going to tell you what I believe about beliefs. And if it seems I don't believe a word of it, you can decide what you believe about the legitimacy of such behavior (then you can decide what you believe about ascribing legitimacy). John Lilly, who has been thoroughly discredited in the straight world — i.e. the dominant culture, which in its devious way via Courtney Love appropriated even Young Marble Giants' Got No Credit In the Straight World — and who is therefore eminently qualified for citation concerning this subject, wrote: My own beliefs are unbelievable. And: In the province of the mind, what is believed to be true is true or becomes true, within limits to be found

experientially and experimentally. These limits are further beliefs to be transcended. In the province of the mind, there are no limits. What would follow here, logically, is something along the lines of in the province of the mind, there are no beliefs. Lilly didn't say so, and it's hard to say so, but I am going to try to say so anyway. I got no credit in the straight world, too. Dylan's when you aint got nothing, you got nothing to lose. Kristofferson's freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. Who believes any of this stuff? When attempting to dismiss belief as a limit or a hazard, it probably isn't wise to quote the truly venerated sages. They all say things that most of us believe at least some of the time, or pretend to believe at least some of the time. Hackneyed expressions of pithy wisdom seem more to the point. We need something we can see through, not something we can hold on to (to believe in this living is just a hard way to go, to continue referencing John Prine). A few years ago I wrote a list of aleatory aphorisms. Using several pages from a dictionary, I read vertically, selecting words as I came to them with the sole criterion being that I arrive at something resembling a recognizable sentence structure. Many of these sentences said things, albeit in skewed fashion, that I could easily imagine myself believing. William Burroughs once said, referring to his cut-up methods, when you cut into the present, the future leaks out. No one believes that. Maybe when you cut into language, your beliefs leak out. Some of us could probably believe that. I remember in high school reading some of the venerated purveyors of pith, Pascal, Voltaire, Blake, to name a few. I loved Blake's Proverbs of Hell. My favorite was always the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. Well, the road of excess leads to to a lot of things (else it might be called the road of parsimony and restraint). It may lead to the palace of decadence, or the palace of accidental death, or the palace of babbling inanity. And it may very well lead to the palace of wisdom, enlightenment as in break on through to the other side (to quote Jim Morrison, who knew something about excess at least, though perhaps a little less about wisdom). Rimbaud's injunction to derange the senses, as well as Silliman's ironic rewriting, derange the sentences, is clear advocacy of the path of excess. Every path has its palace, and the path of excess would seem appropriately to possess a surfeit of palaces. My suspicion, my conflicted belief, is that the writing of ironic aphorisms has a long and venerable tradition. Aphorism and horizon share the same etymological root: horizein, to divide, separate, from horos, boundary, limit. We might say, as if with conviction, in the province of the mind, there are no horizons; or, in the province of the mind, there are no aphorisms (we don't believe in etymology; we believe in association). The limits of my beliefs are the limits of my world. The most

commonly seen bumper sticker around Charlottesville for the last ten or fifteen years has proclaimed Question Authority! A little simplistic, perhaps, but a beginning. When we call our own beliefs into question, we begin to question our most intimate, cherished authorities on the subject of self and world (from whence these beliefs, these authorities, derive is yet another question). I'm currently attempting to believe that harboring an excess of conflicting beliefs is the most effective way out of this prison-house constructed by belief (the language here seems not quite right, but maybe that is a blessing in disguise).

Things to Forget #2

2) everything you've ever heard about what is good and what isn't
Good writing isn't what we think it is.

3.15/16.01 Charlottesville

The Road of Excess Leads to the Palace of Excess

In 1969, the conceptualist Douglas Heubler wrote: The world is full of objects, more or less interesting. I do not wish to add any more. Thirty-two years later, and (my estimate) a few million objects later, there are still too few objects in the world. I am thinking, as I presume Heubler was thinking, of those objects which might be considered as works of art. There probably are enough truck tires zip drives wristwatches handguns cell phones toothbrushes checkbooks Wal-Marts paper clips New York Cities. Enough useful, sensible stuff, in other words, to keep us busy quickly killing ourselves and destroying the planet. Louise Nevelson, sculptor and early practitioner of installation art, said in 1976: I want a lot of quality in a lot of quantity. I want quantity in extreme excess and comparable debate concerning its quality (for those concerned to debate such matters).

My tendencies towards the minimal are strong enough. Absence, silence, and nothingness loom large. Their allure is centrifugal. A refusal of the center, an annihilation of the center. My tendencies towards excess are equally strong. The center for me is certainly wherever I am; for you it is as certainly wherever you are. Consider Black Elk's mythic world mountain at the center of the world in South Dakota, or Guillevic's the middle is everywhere — / and I'm in it. The center is identity writ large. It is self: perception, possession, power. The world is that which has been in some sense experienced. The world as we know it. Experience is perceived as

property. Or experience as perceived is property. The owner is at the center.

The urge towards the minimal removes or ceases moving. It either reduces to fundamentals: quarks for the physical world, economics for human interaction, ideas for art: consider Klein's empty gallery, Kosuth's texts on gallery walls, Asher's air installations, Turrell's light installations. On and on: less and less and less is more. Or it refuses production: the metaphor if not the actuality of playing chess. Neo-hesychasm. All that is discarded becomes an enormously turbulent array, a centrifugal chaotic aggregate. This detritus is the playground and the alchemical laboratory of excess. It is the opposite of the minimal but is inevitably generated by the minimal. Its signature is the fragment. Destabilization is its norm. "I contain multitudes" might be its motto. The I as center is singular, a fiction. The multitudes explode the I. Whitman's container is no container at all; it is the environment of an absent center. It isn't true that we aggrandize ourselves by making objects; the opposite is true: we empty ourselves, absent ourselves. Fifteen years or so ago, I worked for some time on a still unfinished poem entitled "Margins". Its last lines are: The recipe as brief as simple air. / Make more than you will ever need. I'm still working on the project.

3.8.01 / 3.12.01

another failed attempt to photograph reality:

but the materiality that suffering necessarily an imitation shapes itself to exist pretending to be myself hoping this would please you. the present must exist determined to write a story i would do myself a greater service if i pretended to be another, i do not have this regret it radiates in all inherent unhappiness only if language survives in particular to literature if i worked to convince myself that i am other than i am. how is it that as if we is not one, that is claims knowledge and claims none in front of this, while it destroys itself writing is a form of prayer. it has come to this moment he wrote this event with himself to make clear his originality is a question for the sake of something even more (cf. blanchot; kafka and literature). i read breton as an adolescent and practiced automatism, his own story he got from a gap he could not express as a writer in both senses of "I am not happy", which at the time seemed almost reasonable. more recently i read someone else and practiced process, improvisation as long as i am too close meandering the forests standing still at foregone

pages begging yoked spoken lightning stricken vigilant advantages for the
savage fogs commonly sent. procedural extractions from source texts are
nevertheless quasi-intentional. even without processual interventions. i've
been translating a danish text of late fog means visionary ideas bland
rigorous sortation though i read no danish the new statistical mantra is
immersed in tidal sickness. pale visions befall spoken lightning, each story
a steadfast narrative or else death like her unregenerate breath
stammering however the story unfolds in broken letters. by the mysterious
the activity states each one believed but adds illumination. by the
mysterious activity each one believed illumination provokes it. illumination
provokes dissolution. dissolution of speech silence in any case. silence in
any case either by the magic or like a dagger explains nothing mysterious
at my table. this is what i want to do, what i like to do. this is the
scattered indeterminate harm of paper. i imagine in moments of delusion
lucidity guilt insecurity comedy boredom despair that a sort of negative
romanticism is my cherished neoteny scratch that that i should be doing
something other than this. i should be doing something i don't want to do,
something i don't like doing. i should be another death her individual
spiritual familiarity. pages in enigma cancerous man-sized signs for the
death of the village is unmistakable skewed light dances. this possibility of
unhappiness from the harmonious words. i do not complete unhappiness if
the possibility to express constitutes my language eagerly towards this
movement determines its potential in other words towards non-language.
the word tends precisely to another level. another failed attempt to
photograph reality:

january/march 01

Give Up

let it go. somewhere between the phoneme and the morpheme an
aggregate of sounds potentially exploding. from sound through sense
inevitably so let's say intentionally for sake of argument to the blank page
read as everything we know. it looks like an end so it's a good place to
start. it looks like nothing but it won't sit still. we can teach it everything
except the old trick of saying nothing. return to surrender in writing
reading towards nothing. death as an approximate synonym useful though
entirely inaccurate. we won't always be able to fool ourselves so we have
at least that to look towards. prison-houses are easy to find and even
easier to inhabit. let's assume for the sake of continuing that language is

our favorite. blow the fucker up why not we have our methods with a little faith and courage we can go anywhere including insane. it's not as big a deal as they would like us to believe. or maybe it is a big deal but it's not that kind of big deal. it's not about all the sad trivia we're taught to hang on to at all costs and against all odds. there isn't that much to lose. there's a lot of stuff to do but most of it won't do us any good and the rest of it won't do for us what we want and need so eventually we might realize we may as well give up and that will be what we have learned and it will be enough.

a list of things to do:

- 1: give up (write it down)
- 2: relapse to attachment (rewrite it)
- 3: laughter is not a heresy (throw it away)
- 4: give up (read the precursors who have failed; love 'em)
- 5: fuck yourself (with belief and/or erudition; cf. #2)
- 5a: ditto but detoured (as a postmodern spiritual praxis)
- 6: give up (poetry like hesychasm is an extreme sport)

it seems like a long process (but that's part of the hoax)

giving up is hard work. some folks think it's a god-given talent and maybe it is but out here in the swarming quotidian it seems like hard work and a hassle and probably a stupid decision consider the alternatives: i was going to make another list but you can do that yourself. some fine day we'll all be sitting around dying and the only thing we'll regret is that we didn't give up because we should have at least attempted to get used to it a little while we had the chance. writing poetry is a way of getting used to giving up. treat it like an ancient spiritual discipline. do it for twenty years with no significant results. it will ruin your life which is a fundamental first step. you will probably fall in love which is a hindrance and a bother but you'll get over it and go on.

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